Sugar, Land and Female Livelihood in Transition in St. Kitts

By

Joyelle Clarke and David Barker

Abstract

The closure of the St. Kitts’ sugar industry in 2005 was a shock for all its employees. Even more of a shock was the transition in livelihood this closure necessitated for those workers not of retirement age. Although transition to other sectors was expected, it was the tourism industry that provided the largest opportunity for reemployment. Currently, a significant proportion of the livelihoods of former workers are dependent on land-based assets along with employment mainly in agriculture, services and tourism. Using sustainable livelihoods as an analytical framework, in combination with a variety of qualitative and participatory methods for data collection, the research demonstrates that female sugar workers are especially vulnerable. Female former sugar workers have adjusted less readily to the end of sugar and the transition to livelihoods in tourism due to factors such as limited re-training, low skill levels and only basic educational qualifications, and somewhat of a resistance to make use of the available livelihoods training programmes. Concerning agricultural livelihoods, many of these women have been generally unwilling to become self-employed agricultural workers, still hopeful that a large scale government farm program would be the answer to their employment struggles.

Introduction

The sudden shock which ended sugar production in St. Kitts and Nevis in 2005 was in effect a ‘double-whammy’ orchestrated through the negative impacts of trade liberalization and chronic local economic disabilities of the sugar industry. Small island developing states are highly vulnerable to global forces such as trade liberalization and free market policies (Deep Ford & Rawlins 2007). But vulnerability in St. Kitts’ case was exacerbated by inherent management incapacities of the St. Kitts Sugar Manufacturing Corporation (SSMC), out-dated production technologies and a high level of indebtedness to local banks. Despite the increasing indebtedness and failure of the SSMC, the government tried as far as was economically feasible to delay the closure of the industry through understandable fear of the social ramifications of placing more than 15% of the Kittitian labour force out of work and the need to find
alternative means of employment (SABAS 1999). However, when the curtain came down on sugar in St. Kitts after a 350-year turbulent history, the dislocation was quite palpable, both for national income and foreign exchange earnings, and for local household incomes and livelihoods.

The Country Poverty Assessment Report (KAIRI 2007) noted that the closure of the sugar industry had grave consequences for the local labour market. Closure meant that the former sugar workers needed to be redeployed to other sectors of the economy. The national economy, once based solely on the primary production of sugar for a metropolitan market, had begun to transition into service sector employment based on tourism (Government of St. Kitts [GSKN] 2005). The tourism sector afforded the main hope for livelihood transition, but other livelihood opportunities for the tiny island economy at a time of economic recession were relatively few and far between. Faced with the grim reality of the loss of sugar, the government provided state assistance through retraining schemes to prepare both men and women who lost their jobs for the transition into new income-earning opportunities and livelihoods. So the shock of the end of sugar was translated into the personal lives of former sugar workers as the shock of attempting to negotiate a transition into an economic sector quite different in character from the one that had dominated their daily lives hitherto.

This paper forms part of a broader investigation into the closure of the sugar industry in St. Kitts and its impacts on the national economy and on people’s livelihoods. A base-line questionnaire survey of 257 households was undertaken in 2008. It covered socio-economic and personal data, perceptions and impacts of hurricane and environmental hazards and other questions about household assets. The survey was designed to understand, in a broad sense, the vulnerabilities of Kittitian livelihoods in a period of global change resulting from trade liberalization and climate change (McGregor et al 2009). Analysis of the data confirmed that livelihoods are particularly vulnerable to environmental shocks such as hurricanes and extreme rainfall events which normally lead to flash floods. Socio-economic vulnerabilities relate more to stressors such as rising food prices and access to land assets. The data also revealed that more than 90% of Kittitians in the sample depended on monthly incomes or weekly wages for their livelihood, while less than 15% have multiple income sources, reflecting more diversified livelihoods.
It was implied from an analysis of the survey data that the most vulnerable group following the closure of the sugar industry was female former sugar workers. However validation of this was offered by the focus group interactions, and other secondary sources. From the secondary data analysis and the focus group discussions it is clear that by comparison, male former sugar workers have transitioned more readily to jobs outside of sugar. The ease of the transition for men may be explained by the fact that during the ‘dull’ season of sugar, men tended to seek other work, as agricultural labourers on other farms or to find jobs in construction. In other words, they had been exposed to other types of employment and so were accustomed to reconciling multiple income sources. Nonetheless sugar still remained the main source of livelihood income for both male and female former workers. For example, approximately 90% of the workers reported that sugar was the main source of livelihood income (89% and 90% for females and males respectively). Further, of the sugar workers who indicated that life after sugar was difficult, providing answers like ‘staying home jobless’ or ‘unable to find work,’ all were females. In contrast, answers dominated by male former sugar workers were ‘found other odd jobs,’ ‘little effect,’ ‘not much effect,’ and ‘found more hands-on work.’ None of the female former sugar workers adapted to the end of sugar as easily or as readily as did the males. The analysis of survey, focus groups and secondary data also revealed distinct gender differences in adaptation and responsiveness to the challenges of alternate non-sugar livelihoods, and women’s coping strategies were clearly failing. Moreover, the focus group data suggested that the female former sugar workers were having greater difficulty in making the transition to the new forms of employment in tourism which, it had been assumed by policy makers, they would gladly embrace as the ‘modern’ alternative to the traditional drudgery and field labour of the cane fields.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a gender-based exploration of the comparative difficulties faced by female former sugar workers (FFSWs) in transitioning to new livelihoods after sugar. It uses participatory and gender-based research methods to dissect the gendered nature of sugar production and the uniqueness of the livelihood experiences of women in the sugar industry. Focus groups provided rich and detailed information on women’s life histories and allowed them to compare and articulate, in their own words, their work experiences before and after sugar. The first section of the paper explains the rationale behind the
feminist research methodology and participatory methods used. The following section discusses the closing of the St. Kitts sugar industry in the context of international trade liberalization and the subsequently required livelihood transition issues of the FFSWs. The main contribution of the paper follows in the form of an in-depth analysis of the reasons for the failure of livelihood transitions of the female sugar workers, focussing on the legacy of female labour in the cane field, the assumptions underlying the training schemes intended to bring about a smooth transition into new employment, and women’s experiences in trying to cope with jobs in the tourism industry. In the final section we briefly suggest that gender-sensitive initiatives in agriculture offer potential for some women to make more successful transitions.

A Feminist Methodology and Analysis

Although livelihoods research and gender are intertwined and receive equal attention in the literature, there was the fear of committing what Ellis (2000: 139) describes as “representing gender as merely an accessory to other concerns if attempts are made to highlight it in every [section].” Thus the research reported here follows his example of providing a space where the gender dimensions of livelihood diversity - assets and vulnerabilities of the entire population - can be examined in a focused and reasonably integrated way (Ellis 2000).

A mixed methodology of quantitative and qualitative instruments allowed for data collection of the entire spectrum of Kittitian livelihoods. The most interesting consequence of the mixed methods approach was the ability to identify and confirm repeatedly the most vulnerable group in society, households with land-based incomes or livelihoods. Of these households, the research showed that the sugar workers were the most vulnerable economic group. Further, through a combination of interviews and qualitative participatory methods it became apparent that FFSWs were not only the most vulnerable group of sugar workers but are also the most vulnerable socio-economic group on the island. Additional participatory research, using life histories/trajectories and group discussions, further confirmed that the female former ‘field’ sugar workers are the most vulnerable people in St. Kitts.

The use of focus groups as the main qualitative method stemmed from the desire to examine the employment status and livelihood trajectories of these women.
It was also quite fortunate that 2010 - the year in which the data was collected - was the five year anniversary of the closure of the industry. Many of the women involved in the sessions were unemployed and quite a few had no form of employment for that entire period. More significant was that those who never obtained another job after sugar had been without a weekly wage - save the stipend for participating in the training sessions - for over 5 years. The focus group sessions allowed for each woman to speak freely about her life history amongst her colleagues. Detailed information was gathered. For example, during one livelihood trajectory, an FFSW explained that after sugar ended and she lost her job she was simply depressed and not motivated to find employment. She remained unemployed for 5 years. Many of the trajectories provided invaluable information about the life of a woman in the sugar field. The session allowed each woman to describe her experiences, her economic choices, and emotional feelings towards the end of sugar as well as the challenges she faced being a woman of sugar.

The sugar belt region (see Figure 1) was identified for conducting the focus groups. This choice was based on interviews that revealed many of the former sugar workers who were still unemployed in 2010, or who participated in the training sessions, or who received land and/or a house after sugar, lived and worked in the sugar belt. The parishes in the sugar belt are the poorest in St. Kitts and the most recent Country Poverty Assessment Report (KAIRI 2007:78) records the parish of St. John as the poorest parish, as well as the most remote in the context of St. Kitts and thus likely to be most affected by the closure. Therefore the FFSWs live in the poorest parishes. Additionally, the report continues to warn that females in the sugar belt are more likely than males to slip below the poverty line. Thus St. John Parish was selected as the location for two of the focus groups. The decision was influenced by both the training programs and the reports that highlighted this area as one requiring special attention.
In passing it is worth noting that former sugar workers lived throughout St. Kitts but the sugar belt parishes are so labelled not only because they had the largest resident number of sugar workers but also as the parishes with the largest percentage of land under sugar cultivation (Figure 2).

**Figure 1: Map of Study Area showing Sugar Belt Parishes**

Source: Author

**Figure 2: Land under Sugar Production 2005**

Source: Daniel 2005 and Department of Physical Planning 2010
The data collection attempted as far as possible to remain true to a feminist approach to collecting information. Parry (2002: 99) explains that “feminist methodologies are derived from the epistemological positions that data does not exist independently but is constructed through the process of research through the relations between researchers and respondents.” Following this argument the nature and presentation of research have been constructed by the relationship between the researcher and the FFSW participants. In this study, the relationship between researcher and the researched needed to move smoothly along a continuum of blurred to distinct demarcations of roles. At times being too distinct and obviously playing the role of the researcher lent an air of formality that did not encourage the intimate discussions needed for grasping the women’s livelihood experiences. In other settings, too informal an approach conjured an air of unpreparedness, and resulted in irrelevant discussions on gender equating to ‘him vs. her’.

There are several other considerations in doing the field work with a gender perspective. As Bolles (2003:248) suggests, “one unique feature of English speaking Caribbean is female participation in issues.” The ethical considerations are numerous and having to consider the social construction of gender in every aspect was even more of a task (Gordon 1985). One is ever reminded of one’s own gender and sexuality. This came into play in two distinct ways. Firstly as a woman, talking to women, there is the temptation to side with one’s gender. Objectivity and sexuality collided to increase the subjectivity of the data collection process. At times there was the fear that the researcher’s own gender and interest in the women’s lives over men’s may have swayed the women to embellish the severity of their experiences and the lack of support by an all-male government. Secondly one’s own gender and role as a female researcher was constantly caught in what McDowell (1997) describes as the talking man-writing woman scenario, where she claims in many instances men speak to impress and constantly remind us of our femininity.

However moving beyond the format of many of the interviews, a deeper issue in this female-researcher, male-expert scenario is one where obtaining insights from men about the failures of the FFSWs (from their perspective) offered the opportunity to gauge the full extent of what can be termed a ‘masculine insensitivity’ of sorts, about the plight of the FFSWs. This is what Barriteau (2001:122) lamented when she
explained that men (experts in their fields) reduced women to categories such as lazy, fearful of taking risk, small minded approach in business, too family oriented and unwilling to grow. These may not have been the verbatim descriptions for the FFSWs but far too often explanations for their failure to transition were reduced to their ‘gang worker mentality.’ It resonates of what many feminist writers (Beckles 1998) have described as the legacy of slavery that was marked by gender inequality. These may be borderline hypocritical as men are all too familiar with the realm of female responsibility. Women are expected to deal with the household and family responsibilities and still be professional and enterprising. Harcourt (1994:2) opined that “feminists involved in ecological and women’s movements are concerned that the complex social, cultural, economic, political relations, which inform women’s lives and gender inequities are not being addressed in mainstream debate.” Somehow it was easy for males to forget that the female field worker made less money than her male counterpart yet had more family responsibilities.

The sexual division of labour in sugar can be blamed for the disadvantaged position of women in 2005. Yet this hardly ever surfaced in the interviews conducted for this study. McDowell (1997: 394) sees this as a “political methodology rooted in issues of gender.” Bolles (2003) claims that women simply abide by traditionally proscribed roles. In the Kittitian case this is definitely true. Yet men in political positions seemed to have forgotten that these roles now manifest in higher rates of FFSW unemployment and that unsustainable livelihoods are the result of the patriarchal system that they consciously or subconsciously perpetuate. Nevertheless, McDowell (1997) reaffirms that doing feminist geography means looking at the actions of people, understanding how each plays a pivotal role in the whole spectrum of things. The data collection verified these positions thorough participatory qualitative research.

The Sugar Economy and Trade Liberalization

The closure of the sugar industry in St. Kitts in 2005 can be described as a contest between internationally-competitive large sugar producers and the ailing sugar industry of St. Kitts, given that the twin island federation is the smallest nation state in the Americas with a combined population of 51,000 and a total area of 261 km². However, the impacts of trade liberalization were being felt in St. Kitts from the early
1980s, and the sugar industry in the Caribbean had been struggling to compete on the international stage for most of the second half of the twentieth century (OECS Secretariat Sugar Report 2005).

As Pattullo (1996) explains, Caribbean agriculture has long been characterized by one-crop dependency based on the monoculture production of sugar or bananas destined for Europe. This strong colonial legacy left many Caribbean small island economies heavily reliant on preferential access to markets (IMF, 2000). The banana wars that affected the Windward Islands in the 1990s (Klak et al. 2011) is the classic example of how Caribbean small island economies, highly dependent on a single export crop for foreign exchange and for people’s livelihoods were cruelly exposed by the impacts of trade liberalization. Preferential market arrangements with Europe played a significant role in keeping the St. Kitts sugar industry active as world sugar prices declined with the onset of trade liberalization. However, by the dawn of the 21st century new EU/ACP trade rulings saw the gradual loss of preferential market access for Caribbean producers (Ahmad 2004). Critically, the reform of the EU Sugar regime in which the intervention price was slated to decline by 36% over four years beginning July 2006 would have inevitably resulted in rising losses for the SSMC (GSKN 2005). At the time, sugar was estimated to contribute annually only around 4% of GDP in St. Kitts. The new regime meant that extremely small island sugar producers like St. Kitts would be required to (fairly) compete with other much larger international sugar producers whose economies of scale and financial backing dwarfed the capacity of the local sugar industry.

The vulnerability of St. Kitts to trade liberalization is directly related to the island’s dependence on sugar as its sole income source throughout its colonial history. It was only after the 1970s (Daniel 2005) that the island’s economy began to shift from primary production to the service sector as tourism began to take off. In the late 1980s the economy displayed respectable rates of growth. Manufacturing increased in spite of the decline in sugar manufacturing, and this was facilitated by the establishment of the Paul Southwell Industrial Estate, which contributed to industrial expansion. Another major growth area was hotels and restaurants, and output in this sector doubled between 1986 and 1997. During this period of structural change, the contribution of the agriculture sector to real GDP declined from 15.6% in 1980 to 5.2% in 2004 (Barrientos, 2005).
Table 1 shows more detailed data on the change in the structure of the economy during the period in which sugar was in decline.

**Table 1: St. Kitts and Nevis GDP in EC$ million by sector 1986-1997**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SECTOR</th>
<th>1986</th>
<th>1994</th>
<th>1999</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>24.85</td>
<td>29.24</td>
<td>22.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugar</td>
<td>10.90</td>
<td>11.54</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>38.38</td>
<td>55.56</td>
<td>94.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotels and Restaurants</td>
<td>24.06</td>
<td>59.35</td>
<td>54.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>11.44</td>
<td>15.72</td>
<td>19.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are other factors that have impacted sugar’s viability. Natural disasters such as hurricanes and tropical storms have devastated the industry from time to time, destroying many acres of sugar cane with the consequent increase in production and labour costs (Daniel 2005). Hurricane Georges in 1998 is a good example of the crippling effect of a hurricane on agriculture and the economy generally. The agriculture sector saw 50% losses for the 1999 sugar harvest. Further, the tourism sector was estimated to have EC$20,000,000 worth of damage and the National Emergency Planning Agency (GSKN 1998) reported approximately 80% to 85% of the housing stock had been affected. Generally, the hurricane resulted in approximately EC$3,000,000 losses in food supply and major damages to the agriculture sector estimated at EC$22,700,000.

Other local factors that affected the viability of the island’s sugar industry include out-dated equipment and production technologies, archaic and poor management systems and a high level of indebtedness to local banks. From the mid-1980s the sugar industry experienced several key financial difficulties. The concurrent effects of increased labour costs, lower sugar prices and high factory operating costs, and production costs of sugar exceeding the average selling price, all led to significant financial losses and the build-up of debt in St. Kitts over the years (GSKN 2005). The SSMC sustained annual financial losses exceeding $35 million per year after 2002 and had accumulated debt amounting to $ECD 315 million dollars by the end of the 2004 financial year.
Some of the financial losses were a direct result of the declining yields from the land. Table 2 shows the decline in sugar cane production over the fifty year period. Note that the output in 2005 is only about one-third of the 1955 total. Further, the late 1980’s onwards show declining rates with intermittent rises in production. Similarly, data for annual production of sugar from sugar cane for the period 1983-1993 showed an average annual production of 24.2 thousand tons while the corresponding figure for 1993-2003 was 20.3 thousand tons, a reduction of around 16% (GSKN 2004).

Table 2: **Sugar Cane Production 1955 -2005 (Cane harvested and grounded)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tons 000'</td>
<td>390</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Essentially sugar production in St. Kitts had operated at a loss for over a decade and further reductions in earnings as a result of the loss of preferential access to the EU was untenable, so the decision to close the industry was unavoidable. The Sugar Adaption Strategy (GSKN 2004) acknowledged that unprofitable financial performance, the high level of indebtedness to the local banking system and the unfavourable external developments regarding the Protocol Arrangements were reasons that warranted the closure of the industry.

**The Transition Period**

The re-employment of FFSWs was expected to follow the same transitional path as macroeconomic transition of the national economy to tourism. As a sort of torpedo effect to move workers into the tourism and services sector as a means of alternative employment, the former sugar workers engaged in several training programs under the umbrella of the “Sugar Transition Program.” Established to assist
redundant former sugar workers cope with end of livelihoods in sugar, the program included life skills training, training in both traditional and non-traditional fields and job attachments. Both male and female workers benefitted from the hands on experience in other fields.

A key element of the Sugar Transition Program was a project entitled “Livelihood Creation for Women made Redundant by the Closure of the Sugar Industry.” Justification for the project stemmed from reports out of the Organisation of the Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) on the welfare of the redundant female workers. Reports indicated the unlikelihood of the current labour market (in 2005) to sufficiently absorb the redundant workers. Recommendations were made for micro enterprise development and funding, entrepreneurial activities and retraining. The Ministry of Gender Affairs headed this particular project admitting that by the summer of 2006 (the project’s first year anniversary), twenty-five per cent (or 233) of the women made redundant by sugar were not gainfully employed. Operating under the Human Development Agenda mandate identified in the proposals such as the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper for St. Kitts and Nevis, Gender Affairs spearheaded much of the training of the women.

As early as 2006, training became gender specific. Female former sugar workers were targeted by this project because of their obvious vulnerability and failed coping strategies. Training programs were established under three main headings: life skills, traditional sector and non-traditional sector.

Training sessions were organised either according to the residential parish or former working districts. Sessions were held in the parish community centres or in the capital at the either of the Gender Affairs and Social Development Units. In other cases women were afforded practical training at work sites, for example the upholstery and the hotel services sessions. Some sessions ran for two weeks (upholstery) while others ran up to two years (farm attachment program). It was revealed however that training sessions were organised for the parishes because of the women’s need to remain in their respective villages. Moreover, it was a desperate attempt to improve attendance numbers for the sessions. Apparently, the women (especially those from the poorest parishes in the sugar Belt – St. Pauls and St. Johns) recorded very low attendance. The women were unwilling to participate in the sessions unless the incentive of a stipend was offered. Trainers argued that the stipend payment may have been the determining factor in attendance but it was also the main reason for the failure of the project. Women used the stipend as a weekly wage; they attended the sessions to be paid and not necessarily to learn.
Training in non-traditional jobs for women included plumbing, tiling, painting, and light upholstery. From both the trainers and the FFSWs there was an indication of success in these programs. The success related to the assimilation of the new skill, enjoyment of the process by the women, attendance at the training sessions, and successful completion of assigned tasks. Traditional job training included dress making, cleaning, farming, and craft. Expected to be the component that women would eventually create new livelihoods; the traditional sector failed miserably. For reasons such as difficulty and technicality in sewing instructions, unwillingness to make beds in hotels or inability to amass substantial craft sales, the women were disillusioned with the training programs and the consequent failures.

One of the more successful training sessions was the farming program done in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture. Afforded the opportunity for jobs on farms, the women expressed appreciation for this particular training. Not unexpectedly, the farm attachment program ran the longest of all the sessions – it lasted until 2010 when budgetary constraints resulted in the end of the program.

It behoves one as a livelihood researcher in gender to discuss the circumstances surrounding the failure of FFSWs in transitioning from lives in sugar to lives after. The transition phase itself was a macro level attempt at redefining women’s roles from the stereotypical “poor uneducated female sugar worker with plenty children and no husband.” However it is fair to say that this transition, although helpful in its broadest sense, did little to address the gender-based structural difficulties the women struggled with.

Indeed many of the FFSWs did say “just give me a place to clean.” But, according to the trainers, not even the hospitality sector worked for the women. So, if they failed even when given jobs that they were expected to do well in, the overall failure may not be blamed on their unwillingness to do work or transition but perhaps on far more serious implications of ability. This will be discussed in the latter part of the paper.

**Accounting for the Failure of the Female Livelihood Transition**

It is argued here that failure of the transition program is twofold. Firstly, it was the inability of male policy makers to understand nature of female vulnerability. The time-tested axiom about dressing a wolf in sheep’s clothing comes to mind. In this case however, it’s like dressing up a sheep to keep a wolf at bay. Basically, taking FFSWs out the cane field and adorning them with two week training sessions was tantamount to dressing up a sheep. The short sessions in upholstery for example
(which was only two weeks) were insufficient considering the degree of vulnerability and difficulty the women faced in obtaining employment and coping with the end of sugar. Secondly, the transition program attempted to break stereotypes too suddenly. The transition from sticking their hands in the dirt, weeding cane stalks, to making five star plush pillow top beds was simply too sharp for most of the women. This was confirmed in the focus group with statements such as “Its sugar we know and sugar we like, what we know ‘bout going hotel?” (Capissterre, Focus Group 2010).

Some may lay blame on the FFSWs themselves for their lacklustre response when the crisis in sugar came to a head and change was inevitable. They have also been berated for their readiness to conform to the stereotypical Kittitian characterization of ‘being a woman of low status incapable of much.’ Their response has been described as almost self-effacing in the Kittitian economy after the end of sugar. Leo-Rhynie (1997) argues that women select work areas that are traditional for their sex and for which they are prepared. On this same argument Barriteau (2000) suggests, conversely, that this epistemological frame of perceiving women activities through patriarchal lens is unfortunate. Whilst Mommsen (2007) affirms that the Caribbean gender relations are a double paradox of patriarchy within a system of matrifocal expectations, Barriteau (2000:2) justifies her stance in showing that a particular gendered construct of Caribbean women exists based on exclusion. Essentially she argues that women, but more so men, view women in such a way that “their agency as economic actors is often distorted or ignored. They continually reduce female entrepreneurs to traditional female roles of working in salons, services, and childcare.” Given such notions, is it any wonder then that the FFSWs feel that failure was inevitable?

Another possible reason for the failure unravelled by the research relates to the relationship between trainers and sugar workers. The limited success of the female sugar worker transition is perhaps due to this disconnect between trainers, experts and the FFSWs. The transition phase itself was a macro-level attempt at redefining the micro-level reality of women’s roles away from the conventional. The switch from ‘poor uneducated female sugar worker with plenty of children and no husband’ to ‘independent entrepreneur’ was quite unlikely in the initial three years of the transition program, from its inception in 2006 to its proposed end in 2009. Similar sentiments are expressed by the experts and trainers working with the former workers,
paradoxically showing, for once, some semblance of understanding of the plight of the female transition in hind sight. For example, one trainer argued that “they should have been weaned from sugar at an earlier date” and that “the two week training was too short” (Gumbs Interview, 2010).

The general lacklustre attitude towards the training was evident in refusals to participate in training sessions unless they were paid. The failure to launch many of the entrepreneurial initiatives belies the intense training and extensive monies invested in the group of workers, especially in employment related to tourism. Although none can deny the utility of the state’s support after sugar, there needed to be training that was gender specific and acknowledged the existing stereotypes of the women with an attempt to change them. Finally the training should have been done over a longer period of time. From its onset, most of the trainers (mainly women) agreed that there were problems in attendance, participation, and genuine interest outside of the benefit of getting a weekly stipend. It is fair to say that this attempted transition - although helpful in its broadest sense - did little to address the gender-based difficulties with which the women struggled.

During the focus group sessions it was not unusual to experience emotional outbursts from women. In one instance a woman who was nearly 50 years old and who had worked in sugar since her teens stood and beat her chest screaming almost to tears “give us sugar workers preference over the others…let them go and keep us.” This feeling towards the end of sugar production is understandable as SABAS indicated as early as 1999 that many of the workers (especially the females) felt they would not be able to get a steady job outside of sugar. Although support was in the form of job training, life skills and livelihood management, the women still felt it was the government’s responsibility to “find something for us to do” (Capissterre, Focus Group 2010), because the task to them was insurmountable. Being alone, in search of a job was destined for failure. Who would a hire a sugar worker who knew little more than planting cane? And their reasoning was not unfounded.
Tourism: The Panacea for Livelihood Woes in St. Kitts

“Night shift, no sleep, bus fare and half the money gone into bus”
(Livelihood Trajectory Interview 2010)

Tourism has long been seen as the panacea for unemployment woes in many Caribbean countries; St. Kitts is no exception. The above quotation epitomizes the general feeling and attitude of the FFSWs toward the expected transition from sugar to tourism. The failure of this transition in the case of the female workers is understandable. It can easily be attributed to a disconnect between local needs and government policy decisions which occurs with regularity where household needs are not met by new economic trajectories at the macro-level. In a sense, macro-level development policy and structural adjustment left no option other than a transition to tourism. The re-employment of FFSWs was expected to follow the same transition as that national economy, in accepting tourism as the main employer. However this did not happen for the majority of the sugar workers.

On another level we must factor in what Barrientos (2005) describes as the factors, goals and values that women decide are meaningful to them and are used to inform their economic activity. Working in tourism demanded important adjustments. The women were expected to travel to town, preen themselves in smart clothing and adornments, speak properly and behave with some amount of discretion. In addition they were expected to work shift hours that could see them out of their homes late at nights or, worse yet, in the afternoons (the time when most cooked, cleaned and took care of children and grandchildren). Anyone knowing St. Kitts is only 68 square miles, and that the most rural village is only a half-hour bus ride from the main tourism area, would think that the FFSWs are being unfair to their own potential for survival by refusing to work in the tourist industry. However, picture the transition through the eyes of a worker:
Case 1: FFSW’s Description: Preparations for a day’s work in the field. (Focus Group Discussion 2010)

*Her work schedule was as follows - with minor deviations, of course!*

At around 5 am she would wake and dress herself in multiple layers of garments, the clothing was not for show but for protection against the cane stalks therefore the areas that came into contact with the prickly stalks were carefully covered. Tractors would pass through the village to pick up the gang workers. From this point on they would be seen and heard calling to other early risers or other sugar workers en route to the field. On arrival in the sugar field, the gang leader would dictate the task and the morning’s activity would begin. It was not unusual to break for early morning snack before 9 am. The gang experience was of laughter, chatting, weeding and fertilizing all in one. Returning home around midday (sometimes before) the remainder of the afternoon was for cleaning, cooking, and readying herself for the return of her children from school. The work day was topped off with visits, and spending time with family. Having done this on average 13 years, it would be difficult even for the jack of all trades to get rid of such behavioural tendencies and assimilate the more, professional, ‘customer service oriented’ approach needed for employment in tourism.

Ultimately her decision not to work in the city was not influenced by her need for money; it was more influenced by her difficulty in coping with the cultural change this new job required. The tourism industry would have taken these women too far away from their homes, too far removed from the job culture they developed over the previous 10 to 13 years. Phillips (Interview 2009) said that “of 25 women sent to work at the St. Kitts Marriott Hotel, 13 didn’t show, 6 stayed, and 3 left at the end of the day claiming that making beds was too hard.” So, apart from the challenges of dressing differently there was also the expectation that sugar workers act differently too, or in a manner more akin to customer service requirements of the service industry. The transition to tourism demanded quite different approaches to attitude, courtesy and etiquette, all of which were a far cry from the average behavioural patterns of the sugar worker. The females became accustomed to what Stanley (Interview 2010) dubbed an ‘estate culture’ which pops up in many other interviews with experts as ‘gang mentality’ or ‘gang attitude’. This type of group behaviour was basically boiled down to laughing, chatting, gossiping, early lunches, short work span and long break sessions. These were the traits not wanted in tourism-related jobs. One employer on Port Zanté (the main cruise ship terminal and tourist shopping Centre) explained that

- 17 -
he hired some FFSWs and “all they did was come to work, chat and gossip, take early lunches, which comprised of hauling out a big glad container of rice and chicken and eating right in the square” (Interview 2009). After this description of their behaviour, he basically explained that it may be best not to have them in his employ.

However the tragic failure of FFSWs to transition to the tourism industry warrants detailed explanation. The research reported here is leaning towards laying blame on the issue of too great a change in job culture. Powell (1996) explains that many women, especially the unskilled and uneducated, tend to be employed in domestic work. Indeed many of the FFSWs did say “just give me a place to clean.” A place to clean could easily be a hotel room, however cleaning a house or an office building requires completely different work ethics compared to cleaning a hotel room and encountering foreign guests. But, according to the trainers, not even the hospitality sector worked for the women. One trainer explained that ‘the women seemed baffled by the simple measurements used for cutting patterns for dress making.’ She further indicated that simple mathematical tasks such as ‘doing a hand span for obtaining the correct fold over for bed spread was too daunting a process’ (Interview 2010). So, though they failed even when given jobs in which they were expected to succeed, the overall failure may be blamed on their unwillingness to do work or make a transition into a new job, but perhaps on far more serious implications of inability to understand and perform stipulated tasks.

**Solutions: Gender Sensitive Farming Initiative**

Mohammed (2004) argues that the purpose of gender sensitive policy is to bring about improvement in the social, legal, civic, political, economic and cultural conditions in the lives of women and men in the Caribbean. It is only by reinvigorating current development policies with gender sensitive applications that we will be able to improve rural development tailored to meeting the specific challenges of these women. Even though there have been improvements in the discussion forums held for the FFSWs, it is arguable that some basic corrections need to be made to the fundamental formulae chosen to help the women. Charlton (1984) is still basically correct in asserting that women are politically dependent at the local, national and international level and thus they have little say in development policy making.
The research was intended to help these women and the first step had to be in acknowledging the need for a participatory approach to redefining the roles of female former sugar workers. This transition must be mingled with attempts to reinstate these women into modern society so that they can lead successful and sustainable rural livelihoods. Secondly, the next step must be to reevaluate productive activities that failed during the training programs and transition period, but have proven elsewhere to be crucial to livelihood development. Thirdly, attempts at re-establishing a link between agricultural livelihoods and the home base are important.

One problem is the willingness with which women buy into stereotypes. The inclination to think of themselves as ‘less than’ compared to men has been the root cause of the difficulty of a successful transition – a mind-over-matter defeat. It is a matter of teaching these women or helping them to believe that only they are responsible for the new definitions and worth that can be ascribed to their livelihoods. It is a tall order no doubt, to ask these women to take responsibility for their future livelihood path but an important order nonetheless. What is true is that slavery and colonialism can be painted in multiple formats, but what cannot be repainted are the indelible impressions on the definitions of the role of the female sugar workers. The women’s roles, however, no matter how belittling, can be stepping stones for more elevated definitions which should lead to similar elevated lived experiences. For example, one important action of women in the pre-emancipation period was their passive contributions in redefining their roles and transitioning from the sugar field. The reluctance to stay in the field after apprenticeship in particular, was an attempt at taking their roles and actions into their own hands (Holt 1992). Although this was a very passive approach to creating new roles in was still particularly effective. This same attitude can be reinvigorated in contemporary women so they can tap into the nascent source of strength and once again collectively and adamantly transition to new livelihoods.

Another important factor in transitioning to productive livelihoods is that the women view their current asset (the household) as a productive unit and not merely a residential unit. The household is actually the base for the women’s daily activity and, with little effort, can be restructured to provide more than just shelter but also a home-based income. Okeyo (1997) calls for a better understanding of household dynamics. Further, Mohammed (2004) argues that Caribbean women’s control over
their lives is a function of their degree of economic autonomy. Control over economic activity can be obtained from control over the economics of the household. The women already control their homes, so being the economic manager of their productive households should be seen as a natural progression. Mohammed (2004) shows us that historically the majority of Caribbean women have carried the double role of economically supporting families and doing daily tasks and household chores. For many who are unable to obtain steady jobs – like the sugar workers in particular – the option has been to rely on men. SABAS (1999:16) states quite conclusively “for many low stratum women, improved economic fortunes depend upon the availability of three resources over which they have no direct control: men, overseas relatives, and migration opportunities”. Now however, restructuring the home as the base for economic activity allows the women to focus on economic activity without leaving the home unit and hopefully reduce dependence on ‘visiting men’ for livelihoods.

Viewing the household as a productive unit gives the women the right and the privilege to perform their traditional domestic roles as well as support the use of the household as a platform for small business development; whether backyard farming, selling canned condiments, or craft items. This locale of the productivity of the home also eliminates arguments women tabled for not wanting to work in tourism. There is no need for travelling to the city on a regular basis and there is little interaction with overseas visitors and demand for change in attitude and appearance, save for the necessary courtesy and sanitation that befits the selling of any product. The most natural development would be in backyard farming with the sale of value added produce such as drinks and food, supplementing the kitchen garden income. French (1997) berates recent and past agricultural discourse for its treatment of women farmers as either having the same problems as men where women’s role in agricultural production is undervalued even though women do large amounts of field work. She concludes by claiming women may be a dying breed in agriculture. Women’s contribution in agriculture can be revived through home-based farming. Barrow (1998) said that we need to understand the ways in which women’s agriculture is structured; this links directly to Okeyo (1998) who claims that female-headed households can become major innovators in agriculture if they receive necessary support.
Several other options are available for tweaking the culture of farming to benefit the female former sugar worker. However all these are dependent on policy and development programs. It is claimed that measures to increase the incomes of rural women are justified not to improve gender equality but rather to increase women’s role in contributing to poverty reduction. Gender specific attempts can ultimately increase opportunities for FFSWs. Ellis (2000:156) states that “in a rural and agricultural context, land is a fundamental asset.” Although the women’s fear and reluctance to own land may be quite disturbing to those in the political and development fields, as described above, land ownership is still the way forward for successful transition, because women’s ownership of land reduces their dependence on men for support, once they are able to make productive use of the land. When women own land they have the opportunity (with government help) to establish the productive units required for household-based income generation. Bolles (2003) also supports the importance of Caribbean women controlling their own property. Although the FFSWs view land as a burden, this perspective is based on a perception that large holdings require management. Land as an asset must be small, home-based holdings that provide just enough work for one hand.

The preceding discussion is in the context of the ‘lone female head’. One does not want a repeat of other livelihood interventions where men take over the land holdings and farm plots offered to the women and consequently take over the income, or the situation where women become so discouraged at the large size of the holdings and are further frustrated by the need to hire help and manage larger units. The strength of the rural female economy hinges on access to small manageable holdings where the land is close to the household. Indeed giving them land must be matched by encouraging a change of perception through the sharing of new creative and productive uses of smaller home-based land units. It is simply a matter of helping the women to see the ‘land’ side of things.

Ensuring a successful livelihood transition into agriculture first requires that work be undertaken on changing FFSWs’ perception. According to SABAS (1999:27) “the workers do not see agriculture as a viable livelihood supporting alternative, only the rich are involved in farming”. Secondly, agriculture for women must be small-scale and community-oriented with small holdings close to home with ready markets. This does not necessarily negate the idea of large scale female farming. However, for
the sake of the female sugar workers and the difficulties they described, small-scale local agriculture may be the best option. The success of the transition of the Cayon Uprising Women Group\(^1\) of FFSWs was a result of their working in groups and planting in their backyard gardens. This can be an inspiration or a template for women from other communities. Farming affords the women the opportunity to link with the national market as well as to practice the age old traditions of trading and sharing with neighbours. Tran-Nguyen (2004) argues that the new trade liberalization system emphasizes the need for export, and women in farming are thus left behind, and that Caribbean governments take the blame for continually neglecting agricultural development where women play an important role. Group initiative and cooperative farming can also provide the best success opportunities for these women. Unlike large group farming the women can create smaller group based farming which consists either of family members or neighbours in very close proximity to the household. This provides the opportunity for farm monitoring, sharing and trading. The small group also allows the women to feel less risk and less responsibility in monitoring who does what and when.

**Conclusion**

The end of sugar’s dominance in St. Kitts unleashed a barrage of changes, stresses and challenges for both male and female sugar workers. The resilience of the male workers is not only evident in the successful transition of men as a group, to other livelihoods, but was amplified by the failure of the female sugar workers in transitioning. The research argues that attitudes, conformity to socially constructed roles of women, and policies driven by macro-level expectations rendered the new livelihood strategies ineffective in coping with the end of sugar and the transition to the tourism industry. With consistent failure in the five years since the collapse of sugar, perhaps the best course now would be to develop new livelihood options based on the idea that women are bent on remaining close to home and to the land. Thus

---

\(^1\) The Cayon Uprising Women is a female farmer’s group in the village of Cayon, in the northern section of the Sugar Belt Region. The group was established out of the training sessions during the transition period. Their training was group oriented with the women working together to learn craft, hospitality and agricultural practices. The group effort in agriculture initially focused on backyard farming. The women worked in group shifts on small kitchen garden type plots. Eventually, as a group, they petitioned the government for funding and land to establish a group farm and greenhouse. The petition was only successful after the formation of a female farmer’s cooperative, and registering as a farmers group with the Department of Agriculture. This professional approach to the farm group was one of the keys to its success. More importantly, maintaining the micro-orientation of the group’s activities and the productivity of the backyard farm ensured the women were not forced into entrepreneurial activities that may have instilled a sense of fear of commitment to business activities.
developing a household-based agricultural program for female former sugar workers may provide a path to more resilient livelihoods for women.

Bibliography


